PAPER

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Bombing the dams and raising national morale: The Dambusters Raid as an enduring propaganda victory

Part of a continuing project to present case studies of newspaper treatment of significant controversies during the Second World War through qualitative content analysis, this paper considers newspaper coverage of the Dambusters Raid of May 1943, officially identified as Operation Chastise. It examines presentation of the raid by the air ministry, Royal Air Force Bomber Command and UK government and subsequent analysis by historians. It considers the depiction by newspapers of 617 Squadron RAF and its leader Wing Commander Guy Gibson and considers whether the loss of life incurred among the RAF crews involved was justified by the impact on British morale and allies' assessment of RAF capabilities. The raid did not have a significant impact on the outcome of the Second World War. Even the most intense bombing of the type that destroyed Dresden between 13 and 15 February 1945 could not bring about German surrender. However, Chastise did contribute to the defeat of nazi Germany. It raised morale at home and abroad, advertised the RAF's precision skills and produced heroes who personified values of courage, stoicism and gallantry. It showcased British technology and innovation.

Key words: Dambusters, Operation Chastise, Möhne Dam, Eder Dam, 617 Squadron

In his magisterial *Britain's war machine*, David Edgerton's verdict on Operation Chastise, commonly known as the Dambusters Raid, is concise and crushing. He writes: 'In 1943 Lancasters carrying the "bouncing bomb" designed by Wallis destroyed temporarily some dams in the Ruhr region. The RAF did not bomb the repair work; nor did it repeat the use of the bouncing bomb – it was far too expensive in terms of crews lost' (Edgerton 2012: 238). Some criticism of the raid

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has been additionally caustic. Bruce Page, of *The Sunday Times* Insight Team, argued that '… the truth about the Dams Raid is that it was a conjuring trick, virtually devoid of military significance. ... The real story of the raid was of sloppy planning, narrow-minded enthusiasm, and misdirected courage' (Sweetman 1982: 248). John Sweetman notes that 'the waterworks at Steele was out of action for just one hour, those at Horst, Witten and Langshede for less than four days. The water supply for Dortmund fell to 20 per cent immediately yet was restored to 80 per cent in three days' (ibid: 249). Max Hastings reports that a memorial installed at the Möhne dam in 2015 reminds visitors that 'Men, women and children died in the wide torrent of water' and that 'among the victims were hundreds of female forced labourers from Ukraine, Poland and Russia'. The plaque on the memorial concludes that 'this strategic action did not have the military effect expected' (Hastings 2020: 308).

However, the immediate effects were dramatic, and they caused grave concern in Germany. Eleven factories were destroyed and a further 114 damaged. Twenty-five road bridges were swept away. One thousand homes were demolished and thousands of hectares of agricultural land rendered infertile (Connolly 2014: 97). The nazi propaganda minister, Josef Goebbels, recorded in his diary: 'At the Möhne dam the wall was ruptured by aerial torpedoes. The power station was washed away. As a result, severe damage was caused to the drinking and industrial water supplies of the Ruhr area: this also caused a severe loss of electricity' (Sweetman 1982: 226). At a conference with his military leaders on 19 May 1943, Adolf Hitler described the destruction of the dams as 'this disaster in the west' and expressed concern about its impact on armaments production. When General Walter Warlimont, deputy chief of the Reich's Operations Staff, sought to reassure him that the impact of the raids would not be severe or long lasting, Hitler replied: 'That may be so in the three summer months. If a dry year occurs, it will be catastrophic. If we encounter a year when the Ruhr has no water, can we survive?' (ibid).

Ferdi Dröge, a survivor from the small town of Neheim in the valley below the Eder dam 'thought it looked as though a giant mower' had been driven through the valley. He added: The women's barracks blocks had gone ... and now their bodies lay strewn among the debris: the bits of torn houses, animal carcasses, personal belongings. Already the valley had a new name: "Todestal": "Death Valley"' (Holland 2013: 308). Max Hastings reminds us that under the terms of the 1977 Protocols to the Geneva Convention, 'deliberate precipitation of such catastrophes as the breaching of the Möhne and Eder would constitute a war crime' (Hastings 2020: 305).

British and Allied opinion

In the United Kingdom, contemporary reactions were overwhelmingly positive. Surviving 617 Squadron airmen, inured to heavy casualties,

were proud of their achievements and of their leader, Guy Gibson. Indeed, Wing Commander Gibson, who would be the recipient of a Victoria Cross for his role in Operation Chastise, knew before he took off that he would face unusually grave danger. So stressed was he following 170 operations over Germany and weeks of intensive training that M.T. Arthurton, RAF Scampton's medical officer, believed he should be grounded. Gibson insisted on flying and the orders issued to 617 Squadron explicitly required him 'to attack first ... and then to control the attacks on targets X [the Möhne dam] and target Y [the Eder] by all the other aircraft of the first wave'.[1] On arrival above their targets, the orders required each Lancaster to 'call the leader of the wave'. Gibson was instructed to control their attacks using a VHF signals procedure specified in his operational orders. If Target X was 'seen to be breached beyond all possible doubt' Gibson was ordered to divert any Lancasters that had not dropped their bombs on the Möhne to attack the Eder. In fact, he led other crews to the Eder.

The operational orders issued to 617 Squadron make it apparent that Guy Gibson and his crew would spend longer over the targets than other Dambuster crews. Gibson performed this duty while constantly aware of the risk that he would be attacked by German night fighters or hit by anti-aircraft artillery.

He insisted on remaining above the targets despite knowing that his aircraft was not carrying a full load of aviation fuel. The 4100kg weight of the bouncing bomb meant 617 Squadron's Lancasters could carry only 1750 gallons of petrol (ibid: section 29) in tanks otherwise capable of carrying 2154 gallons. Nevertheless, acutely tired and stressed though he was, Gibson knew that he must do his duty with meticulous precision and help other crews to do so too. Once over the dams, orders required that 'the height of attack is to be 60 feet and the ground speed 220 mph' (ibid: section 18).

Despite his reputation as a demanding officer who could be remote, aloof and snobbish, Gibson never asked his men to do anything he would not risk himself. On the Dambusters Raid he more than confirmed this reputation for selfless courage. A document in the National Archives, unsigned but entitled *Report of W/C Gibson's leadership of the operation carried out by No.617 Squadron on the night of 17/17th May 1943*, gives a powerful impression of the regard in which he was held. Brief and compiled before all the details of the mission had been established, this account appears to have been written either as a file note or as a draft contribution to support a medal recommendation or press release. It was certainly the work of a comrade who knew Gibson well: RAF Scampton's Station Commander John Whitworth is a likely candidate.

The document describes in detail Gibson's operational leadership during the raid: 'On arrival at the first target – the Möhne dam – he stood off the remainder of his force while he made the first attack, delivering his

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mine with great accuracy. He took this action in order to discover the barometric pressure over the water at the prescribed level, and in order to test the defences'.[2] These are described as consisting of '10 to 15 light flak guns situated in the towers and on the banks on either side of the dam'. It concludes: 'All crews were unanimous in their appreciation of W/C Gibson's outstanding courage, and of his skill and coolness in leading and controlling, without which they do not believe that the operation could have been the success that it was' (ibid).

The raid certainly left Britain's Allies intrigued. As soon as they heard about Chastise, representatives of the Soviet Union's naval air authorities wrote to the air ministry demanding: 'full description of the weapon used; number carried per aircraft; number aircraft attacking each dam; tactical approach to target and method of dropping mine, bomb or torpedo; structural details of each dam; damage to teach dam including any available photographs'.[3] The Soviet request stimulated lively discussion in the air ministry. Sir Charles Portal, Chief of the Air Staff, suggested two possible responses: 'Either we should provide the information required and at the same time request the Russians not to make use of it, or we should inform them that we intended to make further use of the weapon ourselves and that we were not prepared to release information on the subject until after the operation, in which it was to be employed, had been completed.'[4] Sir Dudley Pound, First Sea Lord, replied that 'there were possible grave dangers to security in the Russian proposal' and asked for time to consider it' (ibid). It was agreed that the First Sea Lord would make further investigations before making any decision.

Air Marshall John Slessor, of RAF Coastal Command, sent a message reading: 'Well done 5 Group and Scampton. A magnificent night's work.'[5] Committed as he was to a strategy of area bombardment which he sincerely believed could end the war without a ground invasion of mainland Europe, Sir Arthur Harris, head of Bomber Command, had been intensely sceptical about Chastise. Indeed, he had remained determined to deploy Bomber Command's resources against Germany's industrial cities and scornful of selective targeting until political support for Chastise rendered opposition futile (Hastings 2019:16). Harris offered his support for the mission only when it became apparent that the operation had support in the air ministry and 10 Downing Street. Now he conveyed his 'heartiest congratulations' to 617 Squadron 'for their brilliant operation against the German reservoirs'.[6] Additional messages of congratulations reached Scampton. Lord Trenchard, Marshall of the RAF, described the destruction of the dams as 'splendid' and thanked the Dambusters for their 'wonderful work'.[7] Air Vice Marshall Sir Ralph Cochrane, the air officer commanding 5 Group, was succinct. His message read: 'Heartiest congratulations on special show. All success to 5 Group.'[8]

The Prime Minister immediately deployed news of the raid to boost British prestige in the USA. Speaking to a joint session of Congress on

19 May 1943 at which the Canadian Prime Minister was also present, Sir Winston Churchill referred proudly to the raid, declaring: 'The condition to which the great centres of German war industry, and particularly the Ruhr, are being reduced is one of unparalleled devastation. You have just read of the destruction of the great dams which feed the canals and provide power to the enemy's munitions works.' Churchill described the Dambusters Raid as 'a gallant operation'[9] and while acknowledging the loss of eight of the nineteen Lancasters insisted that it would 'play a very far-reaching part in German military output'. The Prime Minister added: 'It is the settled policy of our two staffs of war-making authorities to make it impossible for Germany to carry on any form of war industry on a large or concentrated scale.' Hastings notes that 'At this, Congress erupted into cheers' (Hastings 2020: 485-486).

Military effectiveness

Considered from an exclusively military perspective, criticisms of Operation Chastise have merit. The raid involved 19 Lancaster bombers. Each had a crew of seven. Eight aircraft failed to return. Of the 133 highly skilled airmen who flew from RAF Scampton in Lincolnshire on the evening of 16 May 1943, 53 were killed and three made prisoners of war. Some 42 per cent of the attacking aircraft were lost and almost 40 per cent of the aircrew died. Barnes Wallis, inventor of the bouncing bombs that destroyed the Möhne and Eder dams, was profoundly depressed by the casualties incurred. Hastings describes Wallis with 'his head in his hands' during the early stages of the raid (ibid: 202). Sweetman notes: 'Wallis paced up and down in a state of acute anxiety' (Sweetman 1982: 168). When he learned that 617 Squadron's initial attacks had failed to breach the Eder dam he muttered: 'No, it's no good' and buried his head in his hands (ibid). Roy Chadwick, who had designed the Avro Lancaster, flew home from Scampton on the morning after the raid to tell his family that 'it was a great success, but a great many young men died. Barnes Wallis was in tears when I left' (ibid: 234). Air Vice Marshall Cochrane described Wallis as 'quite inconsolable' about the loss of RAF flying crews and entirely unwilling to accept that the percentage losses were acceptable. 617 Squadron's Medical Officer, M.T. Arthurton, described Wallis as distraught (ibid: 234). Wallis himself declared that 'For me the success was almost completely blotted out by the sense of loss of those wonderful young lives.' Hastings notes that his distress about the casualties never diminished (Hasting 2020: 274).

Wing Commander Tim Webster concludes that 'for the effect achieved the loss was acceptable, if heavy to bear for a single squadron'. Typical RAF Bomber Command attacks on German towns and industry involved hundreds of aircraft and proportionately much lower casualty rates per raid. The RAF's attack on the city of Hanover on the night of 8-9 October 1943 offers a more typical example. It involved 504 heavy bombers of which 27 were lost: just over 5 per cent of the aircraft and skilled crew failed to return (Luckhurst 2024). However, while losses on individual raids were typically much lower than those experienced

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during Operation Chastise, total aircrew losses between 1942 and 1945 saw 55,573 of the RAF's 125,000 flight crew killed.

But Chastise was neither conceived nor organised as a purely military project. Tim Webster argues that 'wartime use of the raid for propaganda purposes may have led to overstatement of its success' (Webster 2005: 14). In terms of the military and industrial consequences, Chastise was a limited and short-term achievement. However, considered as a mission to enhance morale and promote both the RAF and British exceptionalism, the Dambusters Raid was a colossal achievement. The impact was immediate, and it has proved extremely durable. This outcome was not accidental. The raid was conceived as much as a brilliant publicity stunt as a military mission. And, in a tired and battered Britain subject to strict rationing, it served a valuable purpose. Seen in this light, as it was by the war cabinet and air ministry in 1943, Operation Chastise was more than acceptable: it was a triumph.

Propaganda value for RAF

The May 1943 edition of *5 Group News*, an internal newsletter produced and read by RAF Bomber Command servicemen, including those in 617 Squadron, carried the headline 'The dams – A new type of saturation raid.' The extended piece below concluded that 'Half a dozen major bomber raids could probably not have affected the results caused by 617 Squadron.' It went on to report that the Möhne dam had been 'broken to its very foundations' and was 'almost empty'. *5 Group News* predicted severe enduring consequences: 'As summer progresses factories will have insufficient water and nothing the Germans can do will be able to make good the shortage this year.' It concluded that the consequence of this 'masterstroke' would be 'paralysis of an area of Germany and addition to the atmosphere of panic and gloom'.[10] The text was accompanied by a cartoon 'Dam-ping their ardour' by an airman identified as J.C. Walker. Walker depicted water pouring through a shattered dam wall and carrying cartoon depictions of Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini to their doom.[11]

The Foreword to this edition was written by the air officer commanding 5 Group, Sir Ralph Cochrane, who declared that 'Much depends upon training, and in this connection, I would mention that the success which No. 617 Squadron achieved against the dams was largely the result of solid hard work in training. Over a period of six weeks ending 14 May they dropped 2,288 practice bombs.'[12] This edition of *5 Group News* also carried a column headed 'DECORATIONS' which listed the single Victoria Cross awarded to Gibson plus the award to airmen serving in 617 Squadron of five Distinguished Service Orders, four bars to Distinguished Flying Crosses, ten Distinguished Flying Crosses, a Conspicuous Gallantry Medal (Flying), a bar to a Distinguished Flying Medal and ten Distinguished Flying Medals.[13]

Tim Webster explains that the British government used 'post-raid reconnaissance pictures to show their Empire, their American allies

and, using leaflet drops, Occupied Europe, the damage caused to the dams, the countryside below them and, by implication, the industrial complex of the Ruhr Valley (Webster 2005: 14). James Robertson, a recent recruit to Bomber Command, added: 'We all thought that the Ruhr had been put out of action. ... I think that if nothing else the raid had a great psychological effect on people's morale' (Sweetman 1982: 255-256).

Indeed, Operation Chastise is best understood as a spectacular mission designed for military and propaganda purposes. Webster explains that Bomber Command was 'well aware of the propaganda value of a successful raid' (Webster 2005: 17). Every effort was made to secure evidence of success. Three Spitfire pilots of 514 Squadron, based at RAF Benson in Oxfordshire, were ordered to fly over the dams and capture pictures of the damage immediately after the raid.

The first to take off was Flight Lieutenant Jerry Fray who took to the air at 07.25 on 17 May 1943 with orders to be over the Ruhr dams by 0830 (Holland 2013: 475). Fortunately, the weather conditions were excellent, and Spitfires of the photographic reconnaissance unit secured a range of clear, excellent and dramatic pictures. Such photography was usually shown to a very limited audience who could interpret it for tactical and strategic purposes. The pictures commissioned immediately after Operation Chastise were secured for another reason: the RAF planned to share them with national newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic and to secure as much positive publicity as it could.

Newspaper reporting of Operation Chastise

In its edition of Tuesday 18 May 1943, *The Times* reported that 'the first news of the RAF's latest success was given by Sir Archibald Sinclair, Secretary of State for Air, when speaking yesterday at the Norwegian Independence Day celebration at the Royal Albert Hall, at which King Haakon and the Crown Prince of Norway were present. After announcing the nature of the raid made, as he said, by "the javelin in our armoury", the Minister added: "Our praise is due to that resourceful and determined Commander-in-Chief, Air Chief Marshal Harris, to the staffs who planned the details of the operation, and to those superbly daring and skillful crews who smote the Germans so heavily last night. … It is a trenchant blow for the victory of the allies and, therefore, for the freedom and independence of Norway.'[14] Further coverage described 'vast damage' beneath the headline 'Ruhr dams breached'. The establishment broadsheet described the swashbuckling heroism of the young RAF crews involved. It explained that 'the bombers came as low as 100ft to plant their mines on the lips of the dams'. The dams controlled 'two-thirds of the storage capacity of the Ruhr basin' and the secretary of state for air was quoted as saying that Operation Chastise had struck 'a trenchant blow for victory'. Sir Arthur Harris, of Bomber Command, added: 'We had high hopes, but the immediate results of breaching the dams were far beyond our expectations.'[15]

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The Times continued to report the Dambusters' success in subsequent editions. On Wednesday 19 May it reported 'Wrecked dams' and 'Devastation in the Ruhr' and carried a range of aerial reconnaissance photographs supplied by the air ministry. One picture showed flooding 13 miles downstream from the Möhne dam at Fröndenberg-Bösperde. This *The Times* described as 'proof of the accuracy and intensity of the RAF attack'. Another picture depicted a railway line 'completely submerged' in the Eder Valler.[16]

The popular, conservative *Daily Mail* was no less enthusiastic. It reported: 'Floods pouring through Ruhr, mine-wrecked dams paralyse Germany's key industrial area.' The headline was accompanied by a reconnaissance photograph of the wrecked Möhne dam spread across three columns. The picture caption declared: 'The smash-up RAF picture testifies to perfect bombing.'[17] The *Mail* also carried a 'picture gallery'. This included a close-up of the Möhne dam with the 'engine house' and 'power station' carefully labelled. This image was accompanied by a photograph of wing commander Gibson being helped into his parachute harness just before take-off. The caption on this gallery of air ministry photographs read: 'The dams and the men who smashed them.'[18]

The Daily Telegraph appeared to believe that the RAF had destroyed the Sorpe as well as the Möhne and Eder dams. Its headline on 18 May 1943 announced: 'RAF blow up three key dams in Germany.' It chose a PRU photograph depicting water pouring through the breach in the Möhne and reported that bridges and power stations had been engulfed as devastation swept down the Ruhr Valley.[19] Guy Gibson was also pictured on the *Telegraph's* front page. This explained that 'He drew the enemy's fire'. The conservative broadsheet also published a complete version of the air ministry's official statement which explained that 'Lancaster crews knew how much depended on their success. The opportunity may never come again and it was an opportunity, as they knew, of doing as much damage as could be done by thousands of bombs dropped on many nights running.'[20] Lord Beaverbrook's market-leading *Daily Express* did its patriotic duty with great enthusiasm. Its headline across eight columns on 18 May 1943 read: 'Floods roar down Ruhr Valley.' The report below revealed that 'Waterspouts shot 1000ft up as Lancasters swooped with sea mines on giant dams'. Its description of the weapons is thoroughly typical. No mention of bouncing bombs appeared in any press coverage. Barnes Wallis's invention was a closely guarded secret, not least because the Royal Navy hoped to use versions against German ships. The true nature of the weapons used in the Dambusters Raid was not revealed until after the war. The courage displayed by the Lancaster crews involved was widely praised, but their outstandingly precise low flying was explained by the ostensible need to drop mines directly onto the dam walls.[21] The *Express* also quoted with approval Arthur Harris's tribute to his Lancaster crews: 'Your skill and determination in pressing home the attack will forever be an inspiration to the RAF.'[22]

The front page of the mass market Labour-supporting *Daily Mirror* carried the headline: 'Torrent rages along Ruhr: Huns get a flood blitz.' The *Mirror's* account was illustrated by dramatic images of the Möhne dam before and after the raid, the latter taken by the Spitfires of the photographic reconnaissance unit and supplied to the newspaper by air ministry press officers. Beneath the pictures, the *Mirror* described the 'RAF's staggering attack' and 'hundreds of square miles of devastation' in Germany's 'most vital and densely populated industrial area'. It explained how Wing Commander Gibson had flown 'up and down alongside the dam to draw the fire of the light AA guns on it' and so help other Lancaster crews to press their attack.[23] In the following day's edition of the *Daily Mirror,* two thirds of page four were dedicated to a reconnaissance photograph taken above Fröndenberg-Bösperde. The accompanying caption explained that 'even here', 13 miles from the wrecked Möhne dam, there were 'submerged roads, isolated electricity works, a destroyed road bridge, wrecked railway coaches and submerged sidings'.[24]

The *Manchester Guardian* immediately identified and linked the two themes that would dominate newspaper reporting of the raids: the destruction of the dams and Guy Gibson's heroic leadership. The liberal broadsheet's first headline on 18 May 1943 declared: 'The breaking of the dams: Audacity of leader and crews'. The accompanying report described Gibson as a pilot with 'contempt for danger'. It explained that 'guns appeared out of slots in the wall of the dam' as Gibson flew up and down alongside it to draw flak away from his comrades. The *Guardian* also quoted an unnamed flight lieutenant who said: 'I was able to watch the whole process. The wing commander's load was placed just right, and a spout of water went up 300 feet. A second Lancaster attacked with equal accuracy and there was still no sign of a breach. Then I went in, and we caused a huge explosion up against the dam.' At this point the dam broke and 'the breach was about 500 yards wide'.[25]

The leftwing *Daily Herald* praised the Dambusters in its leader column. 'Every citizen of the United Nations will be awed – and uplifted – by the latest feat of Britain's Bomber Command,' it declared. It continued: 'By a magnificent combination of daring and accuracy our bombers have breached the two biggest dams in Germany.'[26] A cartoon depicted desperate Germans trying to stop the flood with ice cream bricks supplied by the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini.[27] In the following day's edition, the *Herald* reported air minister Archibald Sinclair's letter to Air Chief Marshall Sir Arthur Harris: 'The War Cabinet has instructed me to convey to you and all who shared in the preparation and execution of Sunday night's operations – particularly to Wing Commander Gibson and his squadron – their congratulations on the great success achieved.'[28]

Scotland's national broadsheet praised Operation Chastise as a tremendous achievement. The *Scotsman's* leader declared that 'the

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breaching of the Möhne and Eder dams by Bomber Command may, when the final results are assessed, prove to be the most destructive raid ever carried out by the RAF. There have been other attacks, conducted with consummate daring, against key industrial targets, but none of them appears to compare with this latest blow in so far as the widespread nature of the damage inflicted is concerned'.[29]

In its news reporting, the *Scotsman* described 'a spectacular attack' that 'tore open the great barrage dams commanding the Ruhr and Eder valleys'. It explained: 'Lancaster pilots who had been in special secret training for weeks dropped mines which they say breached a hundred yards of the Möhne dam, and also released a wave 30 feet high from the Eder dam.' It noted that the attack had been launched 'against fierce resistance'.[30] A whimsical account from a loyal reader appeared in the following morning's edition. The *Scotsman*'s correspondent had been a young student when he first saw the Eder dam on a cycling holiday with German friends. He had been 'overwhelmed at the first sight' of the dam. Local people explained that they rather regretted that its construction had submerged an entire village and its beautiful old church, the spire of which he was able to see poking above the surface of the water while rowing on the reservoir. He noted that the RAF's spectacular feat had 'turned the tide of the waters' and wondered: 'Will the church emerge again?'[31]

Weekly magazine coverage

As a weekly publication established by the BBC in 1929 under its director-general, Lord Reith with a highly educated readership, the *Listener* was not able to report the Dambusters Raid until Thursday 20 May 1943. In this edition, it chose to include a brief item noting that 'Lancasters of Bomber Command have wrecked Germany's two greatest dams at Möhne and Sorpe, which control two-thirds of the water storage of the Ruhr basin: Eder Dam also breached.'[32] However, the *Listener* returned to the topic in its subsequent edition and, on this occasion, dared to raise moral questions that other titles had ignored entirely. The *Listener* believed that the breaching of the dams provoked 'some speculation in the minds both of those who suffered (and survived) the disaster, and of the rest of us, as to future possibilities'. It asked whether there could or should be 'in the moral sense' any limit on 'the damage that belligerents in a modern war may inflict on one another?' Having dared to raise an ethical and moral question which would take decades to emerge in post-war discussion of the Dambusters Raid, the *Listener* rapidly concluded that 'Anything – or almost anything – that is calculated to hasten our victory is justified.' It insisted that no firm moral rule was possible. This was a 'war of life and death' and that 'any act likely to shorten' it 'should be considered.[33]

The *Spectator, the* conservative political and cultural news magazine founded in 1828, was not sceptical. It declared the 'breaching of the two great dams in the Ruhr and Eder by bombers under Wing

Commander G.P. Gibson was arguably by far the most destructive blow ever delivered by aircraft in a single operation'. Indeed, for the *Spectator's* leader writer, this was a 'perfect illustration of Air Chief Marshal Harris's policy of long-distance planning'. It would play 'a decisive part in bringing Germany's fighting power to breaking point'.[34]

The *Economist,* the weekly magazine of news and opinion founded in 1843, seized its first opportunity to comment on Operation Chastise in its edition of Saturday, 22 May. It reflected that 'the German will to war is not yet breaking under the hail of bombs. But the scale of the raids, together with what can be learned from their effect, begins to justify the belief that bombing *could* be almost decisive' (emphasis in the original).[35] However, the magazine was very mildly sceptical. Noting that the RAF could not be everywhere over Germany at all times, it praised the 'sensational RAF raids on the Möhne and Eder dams' but warned that 'the effects of the short smashing raid can be over-estimated in terms both of material damage and of morale'. The *Economist* was unstinting in its praise for those involved in precision raids against 'railways, bridges, canals and dams' but it warned: 'The fortress of Europe is very strong, stronger than many of Hitler's enemies suppose.'[36]

Canadian and US coverage

Canadian newspapers took a close interest in Operation Chastise: thirty of the Dambusters were Canadian airmen, three of them pilots of 617 Squadron Lancasters. Fourteen Canadian airmen were killed during Operation Chastise and one became a prisoner of war. Guy Gibson's front gunner was the Canadian George A. Deering. Deering survived the raid and was among the recipients of Distinguished Flying Cross. He was killed in action in September 1943. The *Winnipeg Free Press* celebrated the Dambusters' success and drew attention to the Canadian contribution. Describing the raid as 'Germany's greatest catastrophe of the war' the broadsheet based in Manitoba reported that 'thousands drowned and whole cities inundated or isolated by surging waters'. It declared pride in the role played by 'Canadian airmen in the spectacular RAF attack'.[37]

Operation Chastise was also celebrated in the American press. *The New York Times* proclaimed: 'RAF blasts 2 big dams in Reich' and added 'Ruhr power cut, traffic halted as floods cause death and ruin' (Connelly 2014: 98). In Maryland, the *Baltimore News-Post* reported that 'rioting broke out in industrial Duisburg flooded by waters of the burst Möhne dam. ... flood waters were said to have inundated areas of the city heavily and repeatedly battered by the RAF'.[38] *Time* magazine invited a writer to capture the atmosphere of the raid and the mood among the RAF airmen. The creative reconstruction began: 'Nineteen Lancasters droned through the soft spring night. ... In the big bomber, the men grew tense after the long monotony of their flight.' Such writing revealed ignorance of the true circumstances. No airman flying

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at 100 feet across German territory infested with anti-aircraft batteries, searchlights and night fighters could have found the approach to the Ruhr valley monotonous. *Time*'s columnist continued: 'It was a matter of seconds now. The bomb doors were open: the flak had begun, pin points of yellow blossoming slowly upwards. ... The bombing of the dams was no stunt by the RAF, but the result of careful planning and painstaking training.'[39]

Creating Heroes

Additional evidence that the Dambusters were involved in a propaganda mission, not simply a military one, is plentiful. Britain had endured four years of war with little to celebrate. It now had allies to impress and cause to promote the sole weapon with which it could take the fight to German territory: the RAF. Immediately after the raid, 617 Squadron's dynamic young leader, Wing Commander Gibson was told by his superior officers that he would be the author of a book about the mission. *Enemy coast ahead* was serialised in the mass market *Sunday Express* during the winter of 1944-1945.

paper

Queen Elizabeth presented medals to 34 surviving Dambusters at Buckingham Palace on 22 June 1943. Such ceremonies were normally conducted by the King, but he was abroad visiting British troops serving in North Africa and the air ministry considered it prudent to make the awards before additional survivors of the raid were killed in action. The popular newspapers took a close interest in the ceremony. The *Daily Mail* published a short front page report revealing that the Dambusters had attended a 'party in the West End to celebrate receiving awards at the hands of the Queen'.[40] The article promoted a detailed story inside the newspaper. On page three, the *Mail* ran a seven-column photograph of the Dambusters in full dress uniform. Beneath the image it reported that 'Thirty four RAF heroes sat down to a victory supper in a West End restaurant with new medals gleaming on their tunics'. It noted that each had been granted special leave to attend Buckingham Palace for the investiture. There, 'the Queen stood alone on a dais'.[41]

The *Daily Mirror* reported that 'for the first time since the reign of Queen Victoria, a Buckingham Palace Investiture has been held by a Queen'. It explained that 'Queen Elizabeth, in the absence of King George decorated wing commander Guy Penrose Gibson with the Victoria Cross – won as leader of the great dam-busting raid'. The *Mirror* noted that Her Majesty had also conferred medals including Distinguished Service Orders and Distinguished Flying Medals on 'members of the Lancaster crews who accompanied Gibson on his raid on the Möhne and Eder dams'. It revealed that Her Majesty wore 'a grey fur-trimmed ensemble with pink orchids'.[42]

Guy Gibson did not survive the war. Despite being officially confined to leadership duties on the ground, he repeatedly borrowed aircraft and took part in raids. On the night of 19 September 1944, he flew

a De Havilland Mosquito in a daylight raid on a VI Flying Bomb site in Thiverny, France. The raid was a success, but Gibson's plane crashed in the Netherlands, killing both of the men aboard. Guy Gibson is buried in the Roman Catholic cemetery at Steenbergen-En-Kruisland in the Netherlands.[43] A telegram sent to Gibson at RAF Scampton two days after the Dambusters Raid read: 'Many congratulations on your success' and informed him that 137 Whirlwind Squadron, based at Manston, had a new aircraft 'ready for pranging'.[44] In fact, Gibson took off for his last flight from RAF Woodhall Spa.

Wartime context

US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill met in Casablanca, Morocco, between 14 and 24 January 1943 and agreed to increase bombing of Germany. Their decision was, in part, a sop to Soviet President Josef Stalin whose Red Army was engaged in relentless combat to liberate the territory of the USSR from invading German forces. Stalin repeatedly urged his British and American allies to reduce the pressure on the Soviet Red Army by opening a second front in Western Europe.

The war was beginning to turn in the Allies favour, not least because fascist Italy was facing defeat. Hitler met a very depressed Benito Mussolini at Salzburg on 7 April and tried to persuade his Italian ally to fight on. His was a forlorn plea. In North Africa, the British First Army captured Tunis on 7 May 1943 and the remaining forces of the German Afrika Korps and Italian Army surrendered on 13 May. Meanwhile, the Soviet Red Army was advancing remorselessly against intense German resistance on the Eastern Front and, at sea, German submarine losses in the Battle of the Atlantic were mounting. Nevertheless, despite Stalin's persistent urgings, Roosevelt and Churchill concluded that their forces were not yet ready to make successful landings in German-occupied France. They postponed the proposed Normandy landings until 1944, insisting that additional time was required to build troop strength and manufacture landing craft, weapons and supplies.

In this context, maximum effort by the RAF was politically necessary and Operation Chastise had significant political value. It emphasised the western allies' willingness to take the fight to German territory. It could demonstrate the advanced night-bombing skills of the RAF and showcase an innovative British weapon. It could also reinforce the value of the British contribution to the allied war effort. And such reinforcement was valuable because, between 12 and 25 May 1943, Winston Churchill was in Washington DC at the Trident Conference. Here, American world leadership would eclipse the brave and lonely stand Britain had made against the Axis powers since June 1940.[45] Churchill was under no delusion that Britain could match American military resources, but he had every incentive to demonstrate Britain's military expertise.

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Despite his shock at the casualty rate among the Lancaster crews of 617 Squadron, Barnes Wallis quickly adopted the optimistic views expressed by Sir Arthur Harris and the air minister. Five days after the Dambusters Raid, the inventor of the bouncing bomb declared: 'I feel a blow has been struck at Germany from which she cannot recover for several years' (Sweetman 1982: 248). John Sweetman recognises that the considered verdict must be more nuanced. The material damage was quickly repaired. Water supplies were rapidly restored. Alternative supplies of electricity were arranged almost immediately and, where necessary, repairs were completed fast. German industrial output recovered. Agricultural output in the Eder and Möhne valleys was reduced because flooding removed topsoil and rendered fields infertile. Specialist labour was required to repair the dams. New defences around the dams included torpedo netting, searchlights, anti-aircraft guns, barrage ballons and smoke dischargers. All required trained personnel to operate them (ibid: 250-255). Sweetman also notes the positive impact on allied morale. Caroline Rowett, a civil servant working to intercept German signals traffic in the government communications headquarters at Bletchley Park, described Operation Chastise as 'a tremendous uplift'. James Robertson, an RAF officer completing training said: 'We all thought the Ruhr had been put out of action ... on reflection I think that if nothing else the raid had a great psychological effect on people's morale (ibid: 255-256).

Conclusion

Max Hastings writes that 'The Reich armaments minister, Albert Speer, was woken in the early hours of Monday, 17 May, and wasted no time in heading to the scenes of carnage himself.' He was flown around the Möhne Valley and visited the Sorpe by car. The armaments minister insisted that all damage to industry must be repaired fast. The Ruhr Valley's contribution to the war effort was crucial. It had to be restored. Hastings describes this as 'a gargantuan commitment in terms of manpower, resources and, of course, money' (Hastings 2020: 486). Seven thousand slave labourers were diverted from their work to build the Atlantic Wall defences against allied invasion of France and sent to repair the dams (Holland 2013: 494).

James Holland describes Operation Chastise as a 'perfectly timed riposte' to those in America who had criticised the efforts of RAF Bomber Command (Holland 2013: 486). The RAF dropped propaganda leaflets promoting the Dambusters' achievement on towns and villages in occupied France and the Netherlands. The BBC broadcast accounts of the raid to those willing to risk listening on concealed radio sets. As it did at home via the newspapers and the national broadcaster, so the RAF, air ministry and ministry of information worked to advertise the achievements of Operation Chastise throughout nazi-occupied Europe.

John Sweetman describes the raid as 'politically timely' and supports the conclusion of the *Annual Register for 1943* which described the

Dambusters Raid as the 'most spectacular air exploit of the month [May] and perhaps the war'. He concludes that it was 'eminently worthwhile' (Sweetman 1982: 265).

Chastise did not have a significant impact on the outcome of the Second World War. In fact, despite the huge resources committed to RAF Bomber Command and the relentless attacks on German towns and cities by ever larger contingents of RAF and USAAF heavy bombers that continued throughout the war in Europe, aerial bombardment did not win the war. Advocates who had believed in its capacity to render ground forces redundant were wrong. Even the most intense bombing of the type that destroyed Dresden between 13 and 15 February 1945 did not bring about German surrender. Germans responded to the destruction of their homes and families in much the same way that Britons had responded to the Luftwaffe's bombing of British towns and cities. They resented it profoundly. It reinforced their resolve to fight on. The defeat of Hitler's armies required a bloody ground war across France and all the way to Berlin.

However, Chastise did make a contribution to the defeat of nazi Germany. It did so principally as a propaganda mission Brilliantly designed to raise morale at home and abroad, advertise the precision skills of RAF Bomber Command and produce heroes who could personify British values of courage, stoicism and gallantry. Perceived in this way, Chastise was a complete and enduring success. It also showcased British technology and innovation.

That it continues to resonate eighty-two years after 617 Squadron attacked the Ruhr dams is testament to its enduring impact. On the home front, and in German-occupied Europe, it had immense and enduring psychological impact. Unique among the bombing missions conducted by the RAF during World War Two, it is remembered with immense pride and affection. The Dambusters, all now dead, still embody a version of courage which inspires admiration. That this is true owes much to the work of journalists who reported it for newspapers and broadcasters and to the RAF and air ministry press officers who promoted it so effectively. However, the Dambusters themselves are the real heroes.

Acknowledgments

My sincere thanks to Dr Sebastian Ritchie of the Air Historical Branch (RAF) and Dr Robert Owen, Official Historian No.617 Squadron Association, for their wisdom, kindness and guidance. All conclusions are, of course, the author's sole responsibility.

Notes

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[2] TNA, *Report on W/C Gibson's leadership of the operation carried out by No. 617 Squadron on the night of 16/17 May 1943*

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[4] TNA, Air 934, 1 June 1943

[5] TNA Slessor to Scampton, GPE NR GPE 9/18 NOTWT, 18 May 1943

[6] TNA, SCM GPE NR HBG40 NOTWT, 18 March 1943

[7] TNA A152 to AOC 5 Group 191800B NOTWT 19 May 1943

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[15] *The Times*, Ruhr dams breached*,* 18 May 1943 p. 4

[16] *The Times*, Wrecked dams: Devastation in the Ruhr*,* 19 May 1943 p. 6

[17] *Daily Mail*, Floods pouring through Ruhr*,* 18 May 1943 p. 1

[18] *Daily Mail*, Picture gallery: The dams and the men who smashed them*,* 18 May 1943 p. 4

[19] *Daily Telegraph*, RAF blow up three key dams in Germany*,* 18 May 1943 p. 1

[20] *Daily Telegraph*, Bridges and power plants engulfed*,* 18 May 1943 p. 1

[21] *Daily Express*, Floods roar down Ruhr Valley*,* 18 May 1943 p. 1

[22] *Daily Express*, Raid a major victory*,* 18 May 1943 p. 1

[23] *Daily Mirror*, Torrent rages along Ruhr*,* 18 May 1943 p. 1

[24] *Daily Mirror*, picture caption, 19 May 1943 p. 4

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[26] *Daily Herald*, The raid*,* 18 May 1943 p. 2

[27] *Daily Herald,* By me and stop one*,* 18 May 1943 p. 2

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